

CHAPTER ONE: A DEAD MAN'S JOURNEY

I floated peacefully, languorously, and gazed downward at the bloody, shattered body lying so still on the aseptic table. A thick partition of glass might have stretched out below me to the four walls of the white room, for the frantic sounds that drifted up were muffled, the images slightly blurred. But despite the activity below, despite my own detached interest, I could easily recognize the pallid face that sat atop the mutilated body. I saw Eric Wayne's face—*my* face.

Swirls of pale green and white created a spectral effect as gowned doctors and nurses hurried to and fro across the scrubbed tiles. As one, they fretted fitfully over the broken body on the table. Not much time left to wheel what little remained of Eric Wayne to a necessary operating room; no time. Everything had to be carried out fast, for only a slender thread, if that much, remained for the struggling medical staff to grasp.

An intern swore as he stumbled over the base of one of the many intravenous poles that surrounded the table, poles from which dangled the life-giving sacks of plasma and blood. The tubes leading to the body poured their liquid into a system that could not retain it. The heart monitor delivered its discouraging message; the irregular visual pattern, the widely spaced, erratic *beep, beep* advised them that they were quickly losing the battle. Those of authority shouted additional instructions, and the body became engulfed in a shroud of hospital cotton, blocking it from my view.

I recall my thoughts at that moment as I watched them. Why are you knocking yourselves out? Why all this unnecessary effort? I have never felt better in my entire life. I am fine. Eric Wayne is just fine!

A few months ago, had you told me I would be sprawled on a table in a California hospital, I would have said no way. Eric Wayne, small-town Iowa farm boy, high-school football star. I had been to Des

Moines a few times, Omaha once, and had always wondered how so many people could live together in one place. But California? Oh, I'm not that naïve, but I never saw any reason for subjecting myself to such a life. I enrolled at a local community college to study agronomy, quite content to play a larger role in the family farm after graduation. My studies got interrupted a year later when Dad fell ill, and soon after, when he died, I quit school to work full time on the farm. I worked with my Uncle Ed for four years, and we did pretty well.

An article in one of my aunt's dumb movie magazines caught my eye one day. It told about Hollywood stunt men and women, daredevils who performed dangerous feats for films and television and earned a lot for their efforts. They had to be real good, quite lucky, or both. I thought back on my own life and figured I had always harbored a love for danger. As a two-way player on our small high school team I had played both running back and linebacker, and my recklessness had won me the nickname of "Mad Anthony" Wayne, a reference to a Revolutionary War hero. I owned an old Harley-Davidson, and when not using it around the farm I would race it in and about the trees of Horton's Wood. I also drove in a number of demolition derbies at a track in a nearby county.

Yeah, I had led a charmed life. The numerous breaks and bruises of childhood did not apply to me. In all my years playing football I suffered no more than a chipped tooth and a sprained wrist. At seventeen I rode in a car involved in the county's worst traffic accident on record: a head-on collision out on a rural road. Six occupants were in the two cars, five boys and a girl. One survivor: Eric Wayne. A few superficial cuts, no more. No, I had never suffered any serious injuries, not until...

I thought about that article for months, until finally I knew that the life that had satisfied me for over twenty-four years could no longer hold me. I suddenly had the desire to see new places, meet different people, do exciting things. I thought about those stunt people, and I knew that I had to go to California. I believed that, with some training, I could succeed at this. Even if I couldn't, the trip would at least provide me with a break from my old life.

I had been in Los Angeles barely a week before I started questioning my sanity. Somehow the reality of it never registered when you saw it on TV or in a movie. The bike, which seemed all-powerful as its roar broke the stillness of Horton's Wood, now shrank amid the onslaught of countless cars and trucks. The air of

the metropolis, quite unfit for Midwest lungs, felt stifling. The road signs, all bearing the names of countless intersecting streets and adjoining freeways, whizzed by in a jumbled blur. Though confused, I managed to keep my act together.

I saw the SUV clearly in the lane to my left as it passed me, but the driver, maybe texting or something, did not see me. I swerved to avoid the vehicle as it thundered into my lane. My own hasty action threw me into the path of a fast-moving pickup truck. This time I could not react, and with a crunching impact the bike flew out from under me. I seemed to float helplessly, almost euphorically, for many minutes, though in reality it could only have been a second or two. The windshield shattered as it struck me, and I hurtled over the low guardrail and down a steep embankment. I came to rest on the floor of a drainage ditch.

Strange: I don't recall any pain caused by the accident. From the moment of impact I became little more than a casual observer. The accident must have caused havoc on the busy freeway, but I didn't think of anything else except the body in the ditch below. Within seconds, many people had either run or slid down the embankment to the shattered body, their efforts futile. An ambulance arrived soon after; I recall how impressed I was with the skill shown by the EMTs, who quickly extracted the body from the ditch and got it on its way. The ambulance sped from the scene, but, while I knew that I accompanied it, the recollection of the trip seemed vague, disconnected from all else.

I now drew farther away from the scene below me, for my interest had waned—nothing left for me here. I turned my back on the emergency room, at least in an ethereal sense, for I recall no physical motion. I could still hear the muffled voices, but I saw what awaited me, and I paid them no mind.

Ahead of me, across a black void that alternately appeared finite and endless, two circular orbs of light pulsed brilliantly with energy drawn from some unseen source. I don't pretend to understand how I knew, but I quickly realized that these lights marked the openings of two passageways—tunnels that led the way to whatever life, or afterlife, had been predestined for me.

But why *two* of them? Why did I have a choice? And, if true, how would I make that choice? How would I know what lay beyond the portals of either? It seemed so unfair at this time; so unfair, and yet...

I drifted closer, until I hovered at a place equidistant from either entrance. From my vantage point I found that I could peer directly down the center of both passageways. On my left, I vaguely perceived the inside of the larger tunnel. For as far as I could see, the walls cast an aura that was at once a pale blue interspersed with dancing flecks of brilliant red. The eerie luminescence stretched deep into the dark void, and though I gazed intently within, I saw no end. A feeling of dark, foreboding mystery emanated from the depths of this frightening tunnel. I should have averted my eyes from the almost hypnotic beckoning of the aura, but at first I could not. Finally I did, and only then did I realize the power of the hold it had on me.

The walls of the second tunnel seemed softer, gentler. They appeared to be as smooth as marble, their color a pleasing shade of green. This tunnel was of a considerably shorter length, for at its far end I could see the blue light of a clear, beautiful day. In the midst of this blue floated a tiny orb, like a free-flowing moon that had been pulled from its orbit. It entered the tunnel, and I discerned a face, though too distant to be recognized.

I waited patiently, for I had all the time in the world. The face drifted halfway into the tunnel, where it stopped. I focused intently on the face, and I knew: *Grandma Josie!* My Grandma Josie! She died just after my twelfth birthday, but I had never forgotten her, for I loved her a lot. Now I had found her, and we would be together again.

I floated closer to the opening of the smaller tunnel, stopping before I entered. I could see her face more clearly now: the gentle creases on her forehead; the soft, silver hair tied in the ever-present bun; the warm smile. Her lips parted, and she spoke, but no sound reached me in the void. I knew what she said though, for she spoke only one word, and she mouthed it clearly: *Tooter!* It had been her pet name for me, for as a kid I had a toy horn that she'd given me. It would drive everyone else crazy, but not Grandma Josie. She enjoyed watching me play with it.

The image receded slowly as she continued to mouth the word. Soon the distant orb once again floated like a free spirit in the azure sky. I wanted to dive into the gentle tunnel, to hurry through it and merge with the blue utopia beyond, but two forces withheld me from this action. One tugged weakly from behind and below me, and despite my unwillingness, I turned. I had forgotten about the scene, but it remained there,

unchanged. I could see the mutilated body, and I knew that the weak force emanated from it. But I turned away, for I knew that it could not hold me.

The second, stronger force poured forth from the larger tunnel and, despite my proximity to the other opening, I sensed that the force was irresistible. With mounting panic I thrust my being toward the smooth green walls of the smaller tunnel, but I could not advance. My eyes, despite futile attempts at resistance, turned slowly toward the pulsating aura of the enigmatic passageway. It caught me, and it held me, slowly drawing me away from the portal of the utopia that I thought would be mine.

Across the void I floated, and as I neared the opening I became aware of a change. The terror I had at first felt upon gazing within the dreaded corridor had given way to a calm, almost euphoric feeling of peace, as if—as if I were going home again! I did not fear the strange lights or the stygian blackness farther in. I knew that this was where I belonged.

I hovered just outside the beckoning tunnel, and despite the overwhelming force that drew me nearer, I paused. A sudden idyllic scene urged itself into my mind for an instant, and in the midst of great tranquility I saw my grandmother's face for the last time. She spoke, and this time the words echoed clearly: *"Tooter! Come with me!"* The words pierced my being, and for a moment they shattered the spell that drew me onward. But just as quickly the vision fled, and I floated there, in total control of my own destiny.

Another voice reached me, but distant, muffled: "There's nothing more we can do for him."

I entered the larger tunnel.

#

The lights of the tunnel seemed different from within, gentler, less sinister. The pale blue aura became part of one's being, as if a vast, singular entity drifted along the passageway. I sensed no up, no down, no distinguishable sides. The flickering red lights were the essence of endless concentric circles that formed the outer contours of the tunnel.

I could discern all that I passed through but had no awareness of my own physical being, visually or otherwise. Time had no meaning here, and I floated for hours, days, perhaps five lifetimes. The tunnel was all that I knew, all that seemed real. I became the quintessence of my own soundless journey. I listened, but I

could not hear. The silent corridor whispered no secrets. Onward, ever onward—a tranquil fate for an eternity, perhaps?

Gone, all gone; no circles, no light. Utter blackness, above, below—yes, I could discern the directions! Anxiety replacing serenity in my—body? I could feel, I could hear! The wind whistled in my ears as it rushed past me, faster, faster. I thrust out my hands in a futile gesture, unable to halt my headlong rush. I looked, but saw nothing.

Anxiety succumbed to panic. But why? I have nothing to fear, I told myself. I am dead. *I...am...dead...* Why do I fear the darkness? I am a fool! But I don't know what's ahead...

The wind stilled; a violent flash of light gave life to the darkness, but I saw nothing, for it blinded me. Then, an impact; I recall hearing the crunch. A foreign sound, a jarring, liquid sound. Was it me? I could not tell, but I knew that my journey had ended. Now, for the first time, the darkness was inside me as well as outside, and I remembered nothing.